NEH – The Most Southern Place on Earth

July 2018

Reflections by Beverly Sweet

I am grateful for having had the opportunity to take part in the NEH – “The Most Southern Place on Earth” workshop. I have many ideas that I will incorporate in my lessons. For example, the many pictures I took will, of course, find their way into my lessons. Rather than submit just one lesson plan, I have decided to write my reflections and show some of the ways the past week will continue to influence me, my students, and my colleagues. So many ideas are percolating in my mind that I think it will be beneficial to write them down so that I can return to them once the school year begins.

The idea of using place-based learning is something I would like to use this year. I know there are places in my community that are significant in our history and I would like to make use of them as we study American history.

Although it is not the Mississippi River, my school is located on the banks of the Genesee River. I hope to make some connections between the Mississippi Delta and the Genesee River, the Erie Canal and the Great Lakes. Wellsville, my hometown, experienced a flood in 1972 which transformed our community. Having read James Cobb’s, The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity, I know that I can draw parallels which will be meaningful to my students. I also read John Barry’s Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How it Changed America. Our local hospital was destroyed during the flood of 1972, people were displaced, roads were destroyed and the town itself was changed forever. From June 20 to June 25th, Wellsville recorded 13.7 inches of rainfall. Many whose lives were affected have died and for others, memories are fading. This seminar has shown me the value of oral histories. Throughout the week, I kept returning to the idea of “voices” – who is telling the story? What narrative is being told? Who decides what narrative will be told/taught? It would be a wonderful project for my students to interview people who experienced the flood of ’72 to be sure their stories are told and preserved. There are also many primary sources available in the local library and through our local Historical Society that my students would be able to access.

Continuing the theme of “voice”, I also hope to empower my students to tell their individual stories. This will give them a chance to create, evaluate, and analyze. By telling their stories, they will remember and, hopefully, become more empathetic to the stories of their peers and others who, at first blush, seem very “different.” I would like to develop the ability of my students to empathize with people who experience the world differently. Even if they conclude with, “I don’t understand – but I want to”, I will have made some progress. I want them to recognize and honor the validity of others’ identities and truly believe that every person’s humanity should be valued.

After watching “Beautiful Agitators” and returning to the theme of “voices”, I think I could have my students work in groups to tell the stories of some people from our community who have taken a stand on various issues. Similar to Vera Pigee, we could investigate who has been left out of the narrative of our community. We could do something similar to the performance we watched, or my students could record their interviews on their iPads and share them on the school website.

While watching the video at the Dockery, I was struck by what the people in the video remembered. The one woman remembered the gentleman who “whistled through his teeth.” She mentioned this several times, so obviously this made a huge impression on her. I would ask my students to think about what people might remember about themselves.

Each year I have a class theme. Last year we focused on change and continuity/ triumphs and tragedies. This year I am thinking I might begin with the quote by William Faulkner.

“The past is never dead. It's not even past. All of us labor in webs spun long before we were born, webs of heredity and environment, of desire and consequence, of history and eternity. Haunted by wrong turns and roads not taken, we pursue images perceived as new but whose providence dates to the dim dramas of childhood, which are themselves but ripples of consequence echoing down the generations.”

We could begin the year by analyzing this quotation and then returning to it time and again throughout the year. I think it will be a good lens from which to study American history.

I was deeply affected by our visit to the court house in Sumner on the same day that the Justice Department announced it would be reinvestigating the Emmett Till case. To introduce this tragic event, I think I will use the quote by Larry J. Griffin found in “Race, Memory and Historical Responsibility: What Do Southerners Do with a Difficult Past?”

“The past…is recalcitrant, stubbornly refusing to go away or to be discarded. The past reminds—makes—us who we are and, sometimes, when we acknowledge that past, it also makes us wish we were not who we are. It fuels death and destruction, and it spurs acts of sacrifice and greatness. The past both illuminates the present and, at the same moment, obscures it. The past renews, even, paradoxically, as it defies newness. It is inevitability, the past is always everywhere, persisting into the present and thus presaging the future.”

I am also considering creating a lesson dealing with myth vs. reality. We could begin by brainstorming some ideas people have about living in rural western New York – or teenagers in general -- and then decide whether or not those represent reality. From there we could compile a list of our ideas of the Mississippi Delta or the South. I would then share some of the things I learned during my brief time in the Delta. For example, prior to this workshop, I had not thought about the diversity of people in the Delta. I would share that Jews were integrated into society, the Irish were mule traders, Italians were indentured workers, the Chinese were recruited to work on the railroads and in the fields and then opened numerous grocery stores. (I think my students will find it interesting to hear how the Chinese straddled the black and white societies at the time.)

I was not aware of the diversity of the South in terms of religion, and I am confident that my students also have some preconceived ideas about religion in the South. I will now be able to discuss Hinduism, Evangelicalism, Fundamentalism, and Judaism in the Delta.

I loved the idea of the “taste of the day” as a way to show the diversity of the Delta. I never would have thought I would be tasting hot tamales in the Delta, had never tasted a koolickle, and loved the idea of eating fried chicken and pound cake once I knew the concept behind it! (I will definitely share the “Chicken Bone Express.”)

I have been teaching a unit on the Civil Right Movement for many years. As I am required to cover more and more content each year, I have had to cut some topics from the curriculum. I am sad to admit that Fannie Lou Hamer was one of the people who I “cut”. I will definitely include her in the future!

I have always incorporated some music in each of my units. This workshop has introduced me to so many different ways that I will be able to use music to enhance my instruction. At this point, I am unsure whether I will use Muddy Waters, Charley Pride, Jimmie Rogers, BB King, Conway Twitty, Ike Turner or Robert Johnson, but I certainly will be able to add more music to my lessons. I have a whole new understanding and appreciation of the blues that I did not have a week ago, especially after learning so much from Bill Abel. (During the week I collected many quotes from people attempting to define the blues. I am not yet sure how I will use them, but they **will** work their way into a lesson.) I intend to have my students look at the influence the Delta had on jazz, soul, the blues, and rock ‘n roll. I also hope to use music to discuss the migrating population of the United States and will now be able to talk about music “migrating” from the Delta and reaching Chicago, New York and Las Angeles – something else I would not have been able to talk about a week ago.

I was reminded again and again of the role of the “bystander” vs the “upstander.” During the week I kept returning to this idea. On the first day, I was struck by one of the quotes included on the Emmett Till display in the hall. Each day as I entered the classroom, I was drawn to the excerpt from a letter addressed to the state prosecutor in the Emmett Till trial.

“The relatives of Emmett Till are sustained somewhat by the knowledge that they are innocent victims and that no fault or blame can be laid at their door. But what about the other people of Sumner? The decent ones, that knew something and wouldn’t testify, the ones that were shocked and outraged, but for fear of criticism or the loss of the sale of a spool of thread or a bill of groceries, denied the best in them. Those are the ones who have lost and will suffer the regret and pain of conscience.”

I would like to create a lesson around this excerpt and., perhaps, combine it with this poem:

**See It Through**

BY [EDGAR ALBERT GUEST](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/edgar-albert-guest)

When you’re up against a trouble,

Meet it squarely, face to face;

Lift your chin and set your shoulders,

Plant your feet and take a brace.

When it’s vain to try to dodge it,

Do the best that you can do;

You may fail, but you may conquer,

See it through!

Black may be the clouds about you

And your future may seem grim,

But don’t let your nerve desert you;

Keep yourself in fighting trim.

If the worst is bound to happen,

Spite of all that you can do,

Running from it will not save you,

See it through!

Even hope may seem but futile,

When with troubles you’re beset,

But remember you are facing

Just what other men have met.

You may fail, but fall still fighting;

Don’t give up, whate’er you do;

Eyes front, head high to the finish.

See it through!

I would also show students the picture of the Fannie Lou Hamer monument where it says, “This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine.”

At the Civil Rights Museum, I copied a quotation by Nat D. Williams saying, “ I hope to live to see the day … when white men will not be afraid to be fair.”

Another quote by Rigley B. King said, “I…personally, truly believe that a lot of the people that was going along with the program as it was at the time didn’t like it, either.”

At some time, all of my students have been a bystander, maybe by witnessing bullying and not getting involved. By studying the courage of some of the people of the Civil Rights Movements and seeing the courage of someone such as Fannie Lou Hamer, Rosa Parks, or Martin Luther King, Jr. my students will see how one person really can make a difference. Ideally, I might encourage them to be upstanders instead of bystanders!

What I learned this week will also be shared with my colleagues. For example, after reading Broken, the senior English teacher has her students think of a way they could memorialize a person or an event in history. I am anxious to share Alison Saar’s “The Monument to the Great Northern Migration” that Dr. Strait shared with us. Seeing the sculpture of a man, carrying a worn suitcase in his hand, with his entire outfit made out of worn soles of shoes, could serve as inspiration for some of their creations.

The Delta does, indeed, have many “voices” and I am anxious to start sharing some of them!